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## Federal utopias and the realities of imperial power

*Citizenship between Nation and Empire* (2014) is a masterwork on the high politics of the end of the French empire in Africa. It is a feat of empirical research, drawing on sources in ten archives in France and Senegal which it weaves together with meticulous readings of legislative debates, legal treatises and periodical literature. While the book's title promises a study of 'French Africa', this is really a study of French West Africa, with particular focus on Senegal. Its attention is principally on the negotiations with French political leaders of Léopold Sédar Senghor and Mamadou Dia of Senegal, with Félix Houphouët Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire and Sékou Touré of Guinée in cameo roles, about the constitutional futures of their territories inside, beside, and ultimately outside the French Republic. As a study of the manoeuvrings of this small African political elite, the argument is wholly compelling. The larger claims which Fred Cooper premises on his study of these actors are, however, more open to question.

Cooper's key thesis is that between 1946 and the crisis of the Fourth Republic in 1958, African leaders were not seeking the nation states they ended up with in 1960, but rather some form of federated and pooled sovereignty, with each other, and with metropolitan France. Cooper brilliantly elucidates how these *hommes évolués* played the political game in speeches, pamphlets and political negotiation, sometimes even as members of the Assemblée Nationale in Paris or French cabinet ministers. He is convincing in his claim that they sought to find ways, federal and confederal, in which African rights (and their own careers) could be made compatible with the preservation of a close association with France, with constitutional independence and the nation state only emerging as inevitable in the late 1950s.

What seems less clear is if there was ever real commitment from French policy makers towards the

kind of shared sovereignty and equal rights which would have satisfied African ambitions. Was there really in practice 'the possibility of dismantling empire' – if at least by 'empire' we mean the linked regimes of racial, economic and cultural subordination, rather than merely a political idea – 'without having to choose between French colonialism and national independence' (p. 10)? Does any of the concrete evidence, so elegantly presented here, really contradict 'the standard view of global political history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a long and inevitable transition from empire to nation-state', or does it merely remind us that between the completion of the linked Westphalian and Wilsonian moments, there were many complex hesitations? Was there in fact, any genuine possible path out of imperial domination which lay through 'Federation' towards 'a truly federal, multinational, egalitarian France' (p. 447), or was the road to the nation state not, in many ways, inevitable? And are there really any lessons from this period which, his conclusion implies, might offer options for Twenty-first century political futures? My conclusion, from the evidence Cooper himself provides, is the answer to all these questions was and is no.

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Cooper zooms in on his favoured political actors and their failed quest for a Franco-African collaborative path out of empire at the cost of some loss of attention to context and frame. What did these valiant attempts to secure the civic and human rights of Africans, in terms compatible with French national interests, really mean in the moment of their intervention of the late 1940s and 1950s ?

For Cooper, we must pay attention to the 'words and actions' (p. 4) of African leaders, whose singing from the hymnal of Federalism suggested where both their values and strategic aims lay.

"The citizenship that French West Africans were claiming in the postwar years was not that of a nation-state, but an imperial citizenship" (p. 9), Cooper boldly writes. Perhaps, at least for the elite he pays attention to. But what if these were instead tactical goals, plausible objectives within a tightly constrained political space? How far was this 'imperial citizenship' sought simply because it was a feasible objective, much as British West Indian politicians, at exactly this time, were asking for Dominion status? What African ambitions were contained in their negotiating object-- citizenship – which were, despite a rhetorical convergence on French elites use of 'federal' ideas, in practice, from the beginning, irreconcilable with metropolitan French political objectives and interests?

Edouard Glissant in a famous essay in 1976 distinguished between 'free poetics' in which a creative actor is able to engage his or her reality through their own language, and 'forced poetics', in which a weaker party is forced to seek its aims via the symbolic system of a dominant one. 'Forced poetics' occur in the domain of political thought, as much as literature. The challenge to those who seek to make sense how those in colonial locations argue their case is to understand how the power inequality surrounding the exchange between colonizer and colonized constrains the language of politics, and submerges within it the values and aims of the colonized, 'something impossible to express' in Glissant's terms. The political thought Cooper is mapping is a clear example of a 'forced poetics', in which the only means of purchase for French Africans was to do business in the ideological currency of the colonial power. 'Federalism' was definitely a goal they thought was achievable in negotiation, we can be less sure, however, what it actually meant for them, or how much of what they really wanted it expressed.

This was a marketplace of power in which the registers of value changed dramatically in the 1945-

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1 E. Glissant, 'Free and Forced Poetics', M. Benamou and Jerome Rothenberg, *Ethnopoetics: A First International Symposium* (Boston, 1976), pp. 95-101.

60 period. The 1946 moment, critical to Cooper's study, was a very unusual one. Underpinning it were the ideological legacies of the interwar period. After 1919 the logic of the Mandate system which explained why France retained colonies in the age of the League of Nations, imagined colonialism as a system of mutual benefit of colonizer and colonized.<sup>2</sup> On the other, the Comintern, in particular via the meetings of the League against Imperialism, in which Africans had participated, imagined a post-imperial future founded on international socialism.<sup>3</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the victory of 1945, Communists were at the centre of the French political life, and it was within a vision of a future socialist global France that Senghor, Césaire and others imagined a convergence of status of colonizer and colonized in a single polity (pp. 86-8). We may compare their interventions to how the Pan-Africanist George Padmore in *How Russia Transformed her Colonial Empire* (1946) urged the British Labour government to transform Britain and its empire into a global federation of socialist states. Cooper, in his liberal focus on elite intellectuals, is perhaps not sensitive enough to the importance of these international political currents unleashed by the 1917 Bolshevik revolution for the 1946 moment.

Nor does he pay enough attention to the central role of the evolution of the Cold War as the driver of events after 1946, although he notes *en passant* the correlation of the exclusion of the PCF from government after 1947 with reform being stalled (p. 132). But the marginalization of Communists in the metropole pulled the rug from under the optimistic negotiations of 1946. By 1948 the 'federal' aims of French policy makers were less towards some horizon of post-colonial equality than towards the realisation of the interwar imperial project of a 'Eurafrrique' (p. 202-4), which would become De Gaulle and Foccart's 'Francafrrique', that is to say towards a vision of collaborative development organised around the interests of France. It was the Cold War also which after 1955

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<sup>2</sup> S. Pederson, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (London, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919-1939* (London, 2013), H. Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic: African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers* (Leiden, 2013), Amadou Lamine Sarr, *Lamine Senghor* (Vienna, 2011).

drove, as Robinson and Louis have shown, that dramatic shift in the grand strategy of the West in the Cold War towards to the creation of friendly post-colonial regimes.<sup>4</sup> The new politics of international anti-communism, as it responded to the Bandung Conference and the Suez Crisis, are absolutely critical for understanding both the Loi Cadré of 1956, and the sudden post-1958 movement towards constitutional decolonization. Federalism, with the Cold War, was increasingly devalued, less an emancipatory agenda than a means for the perpetuation of European global interests, to be jettisoned where other means appeared more efficient.

Across that 1945-60 ideological space some things stayed the same. First, French political actors never entertained seriously at any time any option in which the power, liberties and standard of living of metropolitan France would be diminished in favour of their extension to France's peripheries. Second, underlying this, was a structural (and sometimes ideological) racism, in which whites were understood to need or deserve a priority in policy outcomes. Cooper at many points, to be sure, takes stock of the impact of race. He notes that Moch of the SFIO declared, with respect to the possibility of a French Union with a single legislature based on universal suffrage that 'I do not accept that [French citizens] be put into a minority by negro chiefs' (p. 42), a view put slightly more discreetly by Herriot in 1946 when he warned against France becoming 'the colony of its former colonies' (p. 105). There were suggestions that racial hierarchies might find formal constitutional expression with a first class citizenship limited to white French people, and a second class one extended to Africans (p. 64). And race too figures in the turn towards local sovereignty and ultimately decolonization, as France refused to bear the cost of even paying African civil servants the salaries of expatriates, let alone extending to its overseas citizens the full benefits of its welfare state. By 1954, the French policy intellectuals were clear: 'The application overseas of measures

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4 R. Robinson and W.R. Louis, 'The Imperialism of Decolonization', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 1994, 22, pp. 462-511.

intended for metropolitans must not lead to the ruin of an economy in the process of being reborn'

(p. 219). Cooper, however, seems unwilling to argue that racism was central in a systematic way to the imperial arrangement, and completely foreclosed any possibility of a real transit from the utopian projects of shared citizenship of 1946 which so fascinate him to the concrete extension of the rights and benefits of equal citizenship. Federalism was almost from its beginnings a lie: there was a fundamental tension between France's grand strategy, for which colonies were a source of national power and wealth, and the idea of a shared future, in which the former would always win out.

Lest we think this is an anachronistic point of view, African nationalists, across the European empires, became increasingly suspicious from the late 1940s about the 'federal' projects which the colonial ministries were so actively retailing. At the Congress of European, African and Asiatic Peoples at Puteaux in 1948, for example, the delegates denounced explicitly as fraudulent promises all the then contemporary European imperial proposals for 'freedom within the French Union', 'Equal partners within the Netherlands Union', or Dominion status within the British Commonwealth, which appear to have such a retrospective lustre for some historians.<sup>5</sup> They did so because, as the Pan-Africanist delegate Peter Abrahams put it: 'Colonial peoples do not want to 'cooperate' as inferiors'.<sup>6</sup> As the promise of 1946 withered, many French colonial intellectuals came to share the conviction of Nehru, Ho Chi Minh, Nasser and Nkrumah, that constitutional sovereignty mattered if one wanted to dismantle those forms of inequality which were grounded in colonialism.

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5 Congress of the European, Asiatic and African Peoples. Political Report (Paris, 1948), p. 12. See on Puteaux, Anne-Isabelle Richard, 'The limits of solidarity: Europeanism, anti-colonialism and socialism at the Congress of the Peoples of Europe, Asia and Africa in Puteaux, 1948', *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 21:4, 519-537, DOI: 10.1080/13507486.2014.933187.

6 Abrahams's speech at the Puteaux Congress of 1948 quoted by J. E. F. Last of *De Vlam* in 559 AP 41, *Fonds Pivert*, Centre d'Histoire Sociale, 9 rue Mahler 75004 Paris.

In order to zoom in on his dreamers of federal utopias, Cooper rather pushes into the background those less cooperative French Africans who vigorously demanded full political sovereignty after 1948. Very briefly we learn that France 'did eliminate a political party--- the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC)' which after 1948 had taken a radical stance on labour and 'called for independence at a time which such a demand was considered anathema' (p. 178), and briskly in the conclusion Cooper notes the French government's 'games': 'a repressive campaign against the Ivoirian RDA from 1948 to 1950 and against Sawaba in Niger in 1958, the elimination of the UPC in Cameroon' (p. 459). In process Cooper obscures both an alternative intellectual and political trajectory, and a whole history of French violence against those who did not invest in the utopias of collaboration. What 'eliminate a political party' meant is not explained, and a reader could leave this book innocent of any knowledge of the murder of Ruben Um Nyobé, the assassination with radioactive poison of Felix Moumié, and a counterinsurgency terror in Cameroun of a violence equal to that applied in Algeria.<sup>7</sup> While carefully following every thread of Senghor and Dia's thought, Cooper only twice mentions the existence of their Senegalese opponents who in 1952 had called for 'the liquidation of the entire colonial system of imperialism' and 'national independence' (p. 197), and by 1957 had formed the Parti Africain de l'Indépendance. (pp. 258-9). Cooper similarly only notes swiftly, in order to put it aside, Elizabeth Schmidt's argument for a bottom-up campaign for independence in Guinea (p.317). Cooper pays little attention to the development from the late 1940s, supported from Cairo, Algiers and after 1957 from Accra, of an underground radical French African Pan-Africanism which sought full sovereignty rather than Senghor's 'confederal' mezzanine of a global French republic.<sup>8</sup>

Across French Africa it seems clear that after 1950 there were many who were no longer investing

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<sup>7</sup> See Thomas Deltombe, Manuel Domergue, Jacob Tatsitsa, *Kamerun! La guerre cachée aux origines de la Françafrique* (Paris, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> J. Allman, "Nuclear Imperialism and the Pan-African Struggle for Peace and Freedom, Ghana, 1959-1962," *Souls*, 2008, 10: 83-102; M. Terretta, "Cameroonian Nationalists Go Global: From Forest Maquis to a Pan-African Accra," *Journal of African History*, 2010, 51: 189-212.



in the federal projects of the mid-1940s. If we reconstruct the world in which they lived, this seems hardly surprising. After World War I and especially after 1945, there was enormous momentum behind the idea that full civil rights and the possibility of economic development could only come through the nation-state. The new polities of Central Europe and the former Ottoman provinces after 1918, the logic of the United Nations, the independence of India, Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon, Indonesia and Vietnam all propelled an idea that full and equal participation in the modern world came through full independence. When Kwame Nkrumah declared 'Seek ye first the political kingdom!', he was only giving voice to a common faith that the modern bureaucratic state would only yield its benefits when commanded by a sovereign national community. The French did not want to take their colonised subjects fully into their national community as equal citizens, and offered, themselves, a powerful example of the creative power of the nation-state. It requires a feat of anachronism to imagine that by the 1950s in West Africa political independence was not far and away the most probable ultimate political destiny.

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It was true that 'multiple possibilities.. were in play between 1945 and 1960' (p. 438), and we are grateful to Cooper for the care he has taken to elucidate them. Yet the nation-state was, for many reasons, the most likely exit route from colonial domination. Cooper here takes a rather somber view of the twentieth-century nation-state as associated with an unhappy postcolonial African experience of democratic elections, equality, rights, economic development and education, and of 'balkanization' (pp. 215, 438-447). But was there actually any other plausible path forward? The imperial powers of 1945 were determined to preserve their privileged command of the resources and product of the world economy, and a genuine expansion of full citizenship to all their non-white subjects overseas was never entertained. Why does Cooper in his accounting of the origins of the

failures of post-colonial Africa ascribe so little blame to French colonial rule, and to persistent French (and Western) intervention in African politics, during and long after the moment of decolonisation? As is well known, Foccart and his heirs systematically eliminated the possibility of Pan-African federal alternatives to a post-colonial Francafrique in the orbit of France's economy and military apparatus.<sup>9</sup> It is to Paris, and to Washington, London and Brussels that we must look to understand why instead of the Africa hoped for by Padmore, Nkrumah, Fanon, Moumié, Touré and Lumumba, we got instead a neo-colonial state system in service to the power and wealth of Houphouët Boigny, Senghor, Omar Bongo, Mobutu and Bokassa, on the one hand, and Elf Aquitaine Total and the commodity brokers of Paris and London on the other.

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<sup>9</sup> Georges Chaffard, *Les Carnets Secrets de la Décolonisation* (Paris, 1967); Jean-Pierre Bat, *Le syndrome Foccart : la politique française en Afrique, de 1959 à nos jours* (Paris, 2012), Frédéric Turpin, *De Gaulle, Pompidou et l'Afrique, 1958-1974 : décoloniser et coopérer* (Paris, 2010).